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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP, DRL

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [OPRC](#) [KIRF](#) [KPAO](#) [MU](#)  
SUBJECT: 2007 RELIGIOUS FREEDOMS REPORT ELICITS POSITIVE  
RESPONSE; CREATES OPPORTUNITIES

REF: STATE 151961

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Alfred A. Fonteneau for Reasons 1.4 b/  
d.

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Summary  
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¶1. (SBU) Officials at the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (MERA) characterized the 2007 International Religious Freedoms Report (IRFR) as a fair assessment of religious freedom in Oman and welcomed continued dialogue with the USG on this issue. Post has identified a number of opportunities to build on the positive response to the report, which are presented in the comment. End summary.

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A Positive Response  
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¶2. (SBU) Poloff recently met with officials at MERA to discuss the 2007 IRFR. Amer bin Salim al-Rashdi, Director of Religious Affairs, and Abdulrahman al-Salimi, Chief Editor of the Ministry's monthly journal Tasamoh ("Tolerance"), called the report a detailed and accurate account of the legal framework for religion in Oman that "even researchers could use." They welcomed continued dialogue with the USG on religious freedom issues and, in the spirit of a free exchange of ideas, engaged poloff on a number of specific points in the report. Al-Salimi commented that Sharia law, far from discriminating against women in inheritance claims as the report asserts, actually establishes a basic level of equity by specifying how much of the inheritance women and men are to obtain. Poloff responded that some women have reported unfair treatment in Oman's family status courts, and that judges often interpret Sharia principles in a way that discriminates against women. Al-Salimi offered to put poloff in touch with several judges in the Muscat area to discuss this point further.

¶3. (C) Al-Salimi and al-Rashdi also attempted to clarify the Ministry's intent behind prohibiting religious gatherings in private homes and other unsanctioned locations, which the report highlights as a restriction on religious practice. They assured poloff that although the MERA informed only non-Islamic communities of the policy via a circular in May 2006, the policy applies equally to Muslim groups. In fact, they said, the prohibition is primarily intended to prevent the growth of fundamentalism - particularly radical Islam. Al-Salimi opined that "in the current (post-9/11) environment," some restrictions and government control on religious groups' freedom are necessary to combat extremism. (Note: Al-Salimi recently published an article in "Tasamoh" arguing that Oman has avoided the problems with fundamentalism that have arisen in some neighboring countries

because of the "strength of (its) political authority" that has resisted foreign, Wahabist influences. End note.)

¶4. (SBU) Al-Rashdi further stated that the MERA does not strictly enforce the prohibition, and that the government only attempts to stop groups from meeting if the Ministry receives complaints or if there appears to be a legitimate security concern. Poloff informed the officials that many non-Islamic groups nonetheless view the prohibition as a significant limitation on their adherents' ability to practice their faith collectively. Al-Rashdi said that he would consider establishing a regular forum for communication with religious communities to explain government policies and foster an open exchange of information and concerns.

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Comment  
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¶5. (SBU) The positive response to the IRFR may have created new opportunities to engage local audiences on religious freedom, as well as related topics of democracy and human rights:

-- Contacts at the MERA and in the Grand Mufti's office expressed an interest in partnering with the Embassy to host a conference exploring issues of religion and governance, and asked the Embassy to submit a proposal to the MERA for such an event if the USG were interested.

-- The MERA also suggested that the Embassy increase U.S. participation in the Grand Mosque's interfaith lecture series, which already has hosted a number of U.S. speakers in coordination with the Embassy's Public Affairs Section and

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the Institute of American Values, a U.S.-based not-for-profit organization.

-- Finally, Christian leaders in the Muscat area are willing to host interfaith events to increase dialogue and understanding between Omani Muslims and the expatriate, non-Muslim community, and welcomed Embassy support in organizing these events through the MERA.

Post will continue to identify opportunities for dialogue, and welcomes Department support in advancing these or other ideas.

FONTENEAU